

THOMISTIC METAPHYSICS AND THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI

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The metaphysical system of Thomas Aquinas is a powerful instrument, the correct application of which provides the solutions to many ancient and modern problems in philosophy. The difficulty is, however, that the system is just as subtle as it is powerful: a misapplication of its principles in solving one of these problems will inevitably lead to further complications. In this paper I examine such a case.

In an interesting paper, Henry Veatch explores the synthetic *a priori* as it relates to the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. In it he correctly argues that there is no easy reconciliation of the positions, yet Aquinas' *principia per se nota* fulfils Kant's demand for necessary truths about the world. The question 'how are synthetic a priori judgements possible?' becomes, for Thomists, the question 'how do the *principia per se nota* of the various sciences yield genuine information about the world?'. In answering the latter question, I argue that Veatch fails to distinguish the methods proper to the different sciences. As a result of this failure, he turns Thomistic metaphysics into an empirical science, one which lacks the necessity and universality of true Thomistic metaphysics.

I: The Synthetic A Priori and Thomistic Epistemology

Kant famously divides judgements into analytic and synthetic. An analytic proposition is one in which the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. A synthetic proposition is one in which the predicate is added to the concept of the subject. Thus analytic truths are true 'by

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definition', and are known to be true once their terms are understood. Synthetic propositions, however, need something other than the terms involved for verification. In the case of synthetic *a posteriori* judgements, sense experience verifies whether they are true or false. In the case of synthetic *a priori* judgements, however, Kant believed some 'third' thing must be added to the concepts to 'guarantee' its truth.

The first principles (the *principia per se nota*), or foundations, of Thomistic science are self-evident propositions. These principles are known in themselves (thus are *per se nota*) and are better known than the conclusions which follow from them. Aquinas states that "a proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject" (Summa Iq.2,a.1). For example, 'Man is an animal' is self-evident because animal is included in the essence of man. The truth of the proposition is known when one understands that animal is included in the essence of man.

Clearly, in the Kantian classification, the *principia per se nota* are analytic. This would not be a problem for Thomists, except for the implications of such a classification. As Veatch states, "[a]nalytic propositions, it turns out, since they involve no more than a mere analysis of what is already contained in our concepts, are held to be of no real factual import at all" (Veatch 243). Since, it is argued, analytic propositions are true merely because we happen to use language in a certain way they are informative, not of the world or facts, but only of the conventions of our language. If a proposition claims to be about the world, it cannot be analytic. If it cannot be analytic it must be synthetic, and thus appeal to something other than the nature of the proposition itself to determine its truth. Thomists claim, however, that the *per se nota* propositions "are necessary and yet at the same time give information about reality" (Copleston 28). On the Kantian classification, however, this is not possible. If a proposition is about the world or informative then it must be synthetic and appeal to something other than its intrinsic nature to guarantee its truth.

If the Kantian scheme is correct, then for Thomists "the assertions of metaphysics would be purely verbal, nothing more" (Veatch 256). A Thomist, therefore, simply cannot accept Kant's distinction¹. The Thomist maintains, contra Kant, that it is possible for a proposition to be necessarily true in virtue of its intrinsic nature and still be genuinely informative (i.e. not be purely verbal). It is not enough, however, merely to say Kant is wrong, for Kant showed how he thought synthetic a priori propositions, on his account, were possible. One must show how such 'analytic informative' propositions are possible. If not, there is no reason to reject Kant, and Thomistic science would be groundless. Thus for Thomists, the question 'how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?' amounts to 'how are the *principia per se nota* informative about the world?'.

This is exactly what Veatch attempts to answer. He tries to show that the *per se nota* propositions can be true by the meanings of the terms involved (analytic in Kant's terms), give information about the world (synthetic in Kant's terms) and necessarily true (a priori). He does so by arguing "one can readily see that there is no reason at all why such truths should not be informative or should not be truths about the world" (Veatch 254). At the end of his response, however, he runs into serious problems for the principles of metaphysics, claiming "is there not a sense in which even these principles fall short of strict universality and necessity?" (Veatch 260).

In the following, I argue that Veatch's response is mistaken because he fails to distinguish the different methods of the sciences. He doesn't recognize that principles can be about the world in different ways. By answering 'how can *per se nota* propositions be about the world?', I show that the correct response avoids the problems Veatch runs into.

II: The Division of Thomistic Speculative Sciences

Aquinas stressed the necessity of distinguishing the different methods of the different sciences: "For this reason they are in error who try to proceed in the same way in these three

parts of speculative science" (Aquinas Q.6,a.2). The three speculative sciences are natural science, mathematics and metaphysics. Since Veatch focuses on natural science and metaphysics they will be my primary focus. The sciences differ in object and method and so, naturally, they will differ in the nature of their judgments. In order to see how and why they differ, I must examine their objects and methods.

As Aquinas states, "the speculative sciences are differentiated according to their degree of separation from matter and motion" (Aquinas Q.5,a.1). The objects of natural science cannot exist nor be considered without matter. The natural scientist studies "mutable and material things existing outside the soul through natures... that are immobile and considered without particular matter" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3). The metaphysician studies things which may or may not exist without matter and can be considered without matter.

Aquinas' account of the nature and method of the sciences requires two distinct operations of the intellect. The first is the "understanding of indivisible by which it knows what a thing is" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3). This operation considers a thing's nature without taking the existence or non-existence of the object into account. It can also abstract truthfully what is not separate in reality, since it does not concern itself with actual existence.

The second operation of the intellect "joins and divides, by forming affirmative and negative statements" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3). This operation deals exclusively with a thing's existence. Since truth is an adequation of mind and thing, this operation must compose and divide according to what is composed and divided in reality. Upon grasping what 'grass' and 'green' are, the mind composes the two in 'Grass is green'. Contrastingly, the mind divides man and stone, in 'Man is not a stone'. This operation deals with a thing's existence, judging that it exists in one way or does not exist in another. As Aquinas states, "the operation by which it composes and divides, it distinguishes one thing from another by understanding that the one does not exist in the other" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3).

Both of these operations are important for the present issue. The *per se nota* propositions are judgements made by the second operation of the intellect. As such, they are judgements about the being or existence of the objects in question. The 'analytic nature' of the propositions rests on the first operation of the intellect. 'Man is an animal' is a judgement about the way men exist. The judgement is based on the mind grasping the nature of man and animal in the first operation and forming the judgement in the second. This is a preliminary response to the problem of how judgements can be necessarily true by virtue of their terms alone, and also be informative (i.e. not merely verbal). It is preliminary, however, because the different sciences 'grasp' and 'judge' in different ways, a fact Veatch overlooks. To understand how each science proceeds, we must understand the different methods of the sciences.

Natural science and metaphysics distinguish their objects in different ways. Natural science distinguishes its objects by simple apprehension or "through the same operation which is the abstraction of a universal from a particular" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3). It grasps the essence or nature of an object, not by abstracting the form from matter (as in mathematics) but by abstracting the universal from the particular individuals. This is *abstractio totius*. For example, the mind abstracts 'man' from Plato and Socrates, leaving aside their designated matter and accidents.

Metaphysics, however, does not distinguish its objects by simple apprehension, but "through the operation of the intellect joining and dividing which is properly called separation; and this belongs to divine science or metaphysics" (Aquinas Q.5,a.3). Since metaphysics is concerned with being as being, negative judgements are its primary method for distinguishing. The judgements of the second operation of the intellect deal primarily with the act of existing of things. In contrast, the act of simple apprehension deals with a thing's essence. Metaphysics, therefore, will have to be an inherently and uniquely existential science. The objects of metaphysics are those things which may, but need not, exist

in matter. By considering such objects in negative judgments, the metaphysician at once denies their dependency on matter and affirms their act of being. In short, he considers being as being.

Metaphysics and natural science also proceed by different methods. Natural science proceeds by an especially rational method. This procedure is 'rational' in two ways. First it remains closest to sensation. Since its objects can neither be considered nor exist without matter, it is inevitably linked to the material world given in sensation. Secondly, it proceeds discursively from one thing to another. In it "demonstration takes place through extrinsic causes, [and] something is proved of one thing through another thing entirely external to it", and therefore "the method of reason is particularly observed in natural science, and on this account natural science among all others is most in conformity with the human intellect" (Aquinas Q.6,a.1).

Metaphysics, however, proceeds in a very different manner. The metaphysician proceeds intellectually. As Aquinas states, "divine science proceeds intellectually not as though it makes no use of reason... but because its reasoning most closely approaches intellectual considerations and its conclusions are closest to its principles" (Aquinas Q.6,a.1,r.1). Since the objects of metaphysics are intellectual (i.e. surpass the imagination and sensation), the method must also be intellectual. It proceeds by apprehending truth simply, more synthetic than the analytic, discursive rational method. In this sense it more closely resembles the intellect of separate substances, and thus it is a struggle for man, who is called a *rational* animal precisely because the rational method is proper to him.

Natural science and metaphysics differ in the way in which they distinguish their objects, the method by which they proceed, and they also differ in their end or terminus.² As Aquinas states "all our knowledge begins in the senses ... but knowledge does not always terminate in the same way" (Aquinas Q.6,a.2). Natural science deals with objects which cannot be conceived or exist without matter, and the rational method it employs is tied closely to sense data. The terminus,

therefore, "of knowledge in natural science must be in the senses, with the result that we judge of natural beings as the senses manifest them" (Aquinas Q.6,a.2). Our judgements in natural science must correspond to, and must be modified with new sense data, our sense experience.

The objects and method of metaphysics, however, are intellectual. As Aquinas states: "There are other beings however, that transcend both that which falls under the senses and that which falls under the imagination", and "when we know things of this kind through judgement, our knowledge must terminate neither in the imagination nor in the senses" (Aquinas Q.6,a.2). The judgements of metaphysics terminate in the intellect and are not subject to empirical verification like the judgements of natural science.

In this section I have examined the different methods, ways of distinguishing objects, and termini. These differences have important consequences for the way in which the principles of the different sciences are 'about the world'. In the next section, I will explore some of these consequences, and in the process solve the problems encountered by Veatch.

III: The *Principia Per Se Nota* as 'Synthetic'

As Veatch argued, and I agreed with above, the question for Thomists of the possibility of synthetic a priori propositions is really the question of how the *principia per se nota* can be about the world or genuinely informative. Veatch answers this problem quite convincingly. His solution, however, is overly simplistic. It is because of this simplicity he encounters problems in dealing with the principles of metaphysics.

The argument against the informative nature of 'analytic' propositions was that, since their truth was determined by the definitions of the terms involved, they were merely truths about the way in which we use language. Veatch argues that self-evident propositions are informative because they are talking about the world. For example, 'Man is an animal' is not a judgement about the way we happen to use the word 'man'. Rather it is a judgement about those objects which we

happen to call 'men', specifically they are the sorts of things we call 'animals'. The confusion, Veatch argues, rests on a confusion between what is meant and the meaning. *Per se nota* propositions are judgements about things.

Secondly, the objective nature of *per se nota* propositions serve to refute the claim that analytic propositions are mere verbalisms. The proposition 'Man is an animal' is self-evident (analytic), "[b]ut clearly, the self-evidence of this principle does not have to turn on our understanding the meaning of *man* or *animal*" (Veatch 258). 'Man is an animal' is self-evident because of the intrinsic nature of the proposition, independently of our understanding it, or calling a man a man, or an animal an animal. The proposition is only self-evident because the nature of man includes animal. Thus the proposition must be informative. As Veatch concludes:

if 'dependence on meanings and concepts' is understood as dependence on the things so meant and the objects so conceived, then the truth of a self-evident proposition will of course depend on the facts in the case and on the way the world is" (Veatch 259).

Concluding from these two arguments, Veatch asks:

Who says then, that the self-evident truths of metaphysics cannot be about the world and cannot even claim to be factual statements at all? No; the self-evidence of such principles means just that they are evident through the facts themselves that these principles are about and not through any other facts or anything else whatever. (Veatch 260)

After thus concluding, Veatch runs into more problems. If the principles of metaphysics are informative in this way, are about the facts, then how can they maintain their necessity and universality? He develops this problem in two ways.

First, it seems as though "these principles [of metaphysics] are able to have factual import and to apply to the real world only if there is such a world or created universe for

them to apply to" (Veatch 261). Furthermore, the existence of the world is contingent upon the will of God. These principles must posit that there are such objects as they are talking about, and such a positing is not necessary nor universal. The example he uses is 'If anything is an accident, then it can only be the accident of a substance'. If such a proposition can have factual import only if there is a world to apply to then it must also add 'There are such accidents in the world'. The second proposition, Veatch argues, is neither necessary nor universal.

The second problem Veatch faces is that if the principles of metaphysics require 'facts' to apply to, and the facts of our world are contingent, "then will it not likewise be contingent and open to question whether these particular self-evident propositions or some others are the ones that apply to the facts of our world?" (Veatch 261). Veatch argues that if this world is contingent then it may be ordered according to different principles than those of Thomistic metaphysics. If so then how is it possible to determine which principles are correct? One can conceive of other possible worlds, and one can conceive that our world is ordered differently than we had thought. Given the conceivable alternatives, "how are we to know which order is the actual one?" for:

it would seem that it could not be by experience that we know that the order of our world is one of substance-accident, of cause-effect, and so on, since experience can never guarantee the requisite universality and necessity of such principles. (Veatch 262)

And this problem returns once again to the beginning, and to how propositions about the world can be necessarily true, or 'How are synthetic a priori judgements possible?'

Veatch faces these problems because he did not answer the original question correctly. More directly, he failed to distinguish the methods of the different sciences. Drawing from what I said above, I shall now show where Veatch falls into error, and that the true Thomistic position avoids such problems in its solution.

Veatch has no problems with the way in which the principles of natural science are informative. In fact, his example, 'Man is an animal' is a principle of natural science. In natural science, the intellect abstracts the essence or nature of its object, in this case man. The judgement based on this nature, 'Man is an animal' is self-evident to us because we have grasped the nature of man. This judgement is based on the nature, but strictly speaking it is about the world because the terminus of the science is sensation. We know they are true because they are self-evident, but they are only true because the judgements conform to what sensation delivers. It is clear that natural science and its principles will be informative or 'about the world' because its method and terminus never strays from sensation.

Here Veatch is correct in claiming the *principia per se nota* are informative, even though his explanation is simplistic. All *principia per se nota*, however, are not alike. What Veatch does is force metaphysics to conform to the methods of natural science. In short, he makes metaphysics empirical by demanding its principles be 'about the world' in the same way the as the principles of natural science. Metaphysics has a different method and terminus than natural science and therefore its principles apply to the world in a different manner; if one does not recognize this, he will be faced with the same problems as the 'empirical metaphysics' of Veatch.

The question now is, how do the principles of metaphysics apply to the world? The judgements and principles of metaphysics are about the world in a rather peculiar way. To begin with metaphysics distinguishes its objects by separation. As we have seen this makes the subject inherently existential. In the beginning, therefore, metaphysics has a great deal of factual import. The procedure or method of metaphysics, however, removes it from the realm of sensation, and presumably from Veatch's factual world. This culminates in the terminus of metaphysics, which is the intellect. It seems as though its judgements are too transcendent to be about the world. On this very subject, however, the eminent Thomist Jacques Maritain remarks:

The judgement wherein knowledge is perfected opens upon the pure intelligible. For it is not because (as in the case of the philosophy of nature) it depends essentially on sensible experience, but rather because of its transcendence, that metaphysics descends (as mathematics does not) to the world of sensible existence. (Maritain 56)

It is because of the transcendence of metaphysical objects and judgements that they apply to the sensible world.

The subject matter of metaphysics is being as being. Anything which actually or possibly exists does so because it possesses being. Since the judgements of metaphysics apply to *ens inquantum ens*, they apply to all beings. Since the judgements are about all being, it applies to the specific type of being which is called sensible being. Furthermore it applies to God as that which is said of the effect applies to the cause. This is how the judgements of metaphysics apply to our world.

From this we can see the problems Veatch encountered need not have arisen. Since the judgements apply to all being (*ens commune*), they necessarily apply to sensible being, even though they are not *about* sensible being. We need not posit that 'there are such things as accidents in the world' for 'If anything is an accident, then it can only be the accident of a substance' to be universally and necessarily true. For it is a claim about being in itself, the perfect instance of which is God, and God is ultimately necessary. Furthermore the claim is universal insofar as it applies to all possible being and beings. Veatch, therefore, is mistaken when he questions how we know the principles apply to other possible worlds or even if our world is so ordered. The judgements of metaphysics apply to all possible being and beings.

As to the question 'how are synthetic a priori judgements possible?' we have seen that for Thomists this amounts to 'how do the *principia per se nota* of the various sciences yield genuine information about the world?'. I have argued that Veatch answered this question incorrectly and in doing so turned metaphysics into an empirical science. I have also given the correct Thomistic response to the question, a re-

sponse which (based on the distinction of the objects and methods of the various sciences) solves the problem while preserving the integrity, necessity and value of metaphysical knowledge.

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NOTES

1. "In short, on the issue of the possibility of the synthetic a priori, there just is not any way of avoiding a choice as between Aquinas and Kant. One either has to fish... with Aquinas, or be content to cut bait with Kant" (Veatch 253).

2. Maurer defines terminus as where the intellect finds "in the data grasped by the faculty in question the evidence on which it bases the truth of its judgement" .(p.74,n.1)